DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 388 CS 207 805

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TITLE Improving Classroom Communication. The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices.
INSTITUTION Dingle Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC. Basic Skills Improvement Program.
PUB DATE 83
CONTRACT 300-81-0400
NOTE 29p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Apprehension; Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; Interaction; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Prepared as part of a series applying recent research in oral and written communication instruction to classroom practice, this booklet reviews research and presents suggestions designed to improve the classroom communication climate. The first section of the booklet describes the process of building a supportive environment to reflect a range of written and oral communication that will enhance learning and self concept. The second section discusses the specific interpersonal competencies teachers need in order to build an interactive classroom, including positive self-concept, self-disclosure, descriptiveness, empathy, appropriate response styles, and behavioral flexibility. The third section examines the various teacher roles of information dispenser, discussion leader, and small-group facilitator, while the fourth describes environmental issues such as furniture arrangement and room decor. The final section reviews a number of barriers to student-teacher interaction, including teacher expectancy, communication apprehension, writing apprehension, and sex role differences. (FL)

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Improving Classroom Communication

By Pamela J. Cooper
and Kathleen M. Galvin

The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices

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The purpose of this series is to provide information to assist teachers and curriculum planners at all grade levels in improving communication skills across the major disciplines.

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ED233388

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1983

CS207805

Developed pursuant to Contract No. 300-81-0400 by Dingle Associates, Inc.

This project is funded by the United States Department of Education under Title II of the National Basic Skills Improvement Act, Public Law 95-561.

The project presented herein was developed pursuant to a contract from the United States Department of Education. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the United States Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

PREFACE

During the past decade, teachers, education administrators and researchers, and the general public have become increasingly concerned about students' ability to communicate. This broad public concern for improvement in education led to the enactment of Title II, Basic Skills Improvement Act, Public Law 95-561. The Basic Skills legislation encourages Federal, State, and local education agencies to utilize " . . . all available resources for elementary and secondary education to improve instruction so that all children are able to master the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and effective communication, both written and oral." Section 209 of the act specifically authorizes the Secretary of Education to collect and analyze information about the results of activities carried out under Title II. Thus, improved instruction in the basic communication skills—speaking, listening, and writing—has become the focus of programs and research projects throughout the country.

The booklets in this series, *The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices*, provide information to assist teachers and curriculum planners at all grade levels to improve communication skills across all major disciplines. Developed under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education, the 12 booklets apply recent research in oral and written communication instruction to classroom practice. They contain descriptions of teaching practices; summaries and analyses of pertinent theories and research findings; practical suggestions for teachers; and lists of references and resources. Also included is a booklet on inservice training which suggests how the series can be used in professional development programs.

The booklets were developed through the efforts of an Editorial Advisory Committee comprised of 14 professionals in both the academic and research areas of written and oral communication education. The group worked with the sponsoring agency, the Department of Education's Basic Skills Improvement Program, and Dingle Associates, Inc., a professional services firm.

The committee members, in consultation with the Department of Education staff, chose issues and developed topics. Ten of the 14 committee members authored papers. The committee reviewed the papers and provided additional expertise in preparing the final booklets, which were edited and designed by Dingle Associates.

We are grateful to the committee members, advisors, and all others who contributed their expertise to the project. The committee members were:

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It is hoped that the booklets in this series will be valuable to classroom and administrative professionals in developing or restructuring their communication skills programs. They may also be useful to community and parent groups in their dialogue with members of the educational system. The ultimate benefit of this project, however, will be realized in our children's enhanced ability to communicate, both orally and in written language.

Sherwood R. Simons
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IMPROVING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

As teachers, we are members and managers of a classroom system which depends on oral and written communication to function. Teachers and students are bound in a relationship built through communication. The term "system" implies a set of parts and the relationship between them that form a complex whole. If one part of a system changes, the other parts change in response to that change. Imagine that the teacher and class members are a mobile: When one part of the mobile is stirred by a breeze, every other part reverberates to some extent. Thus, the actions of one member or a small group will have an effect on the other members because of their interdependence. A rowdy group, a cheerful child, a worried teacher all influence to some degree the way in which the class functions. As manager of this system, you serve to influence strongly through your interpersonal and instructional competencies the learning climate which affects motivation and achievement.

Classroom communication is important for two reasons. First, oral communication is the dominant medium of learning. It occurs throughout the school day in every curriculum area. Second, students often do not know what they actually think or feel until they "talk it through." As Buckley (1976, p. 623) suggests, "to quiet the child's tongue is to quiet the child's mind." Thus, building a communication climate which enhances classroom oral communication is extremely important.

How do we reach the goal of having students and teachers freely exchanging ideas and feelings; questioning and disputing with comfort; listening carefully and caringly; and applying, analyzing, and evaluating with freedom? Such learning environments do exist, but, since most of us did not experience these as students, it is hard to put into practice ideas or procedures that we have only heard about. Yet, we must try, or the method of one-way, teacher-to-student, didactic communication that seemingly serves but a few students well will be perpetuated. The next sections will describe the process of building a supportive environment to reflect a range of written and oral communication which will enhance learning and self-concept. These sections will focus on 1) building a supportive climate for communication from the psychological and physical perspective, 2) developing teacher communication competence for purposes of instruction and modeling, and 3) handling barriers to classroom interaction.

BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

Rationale for climate concern

Educational research indicates that a positive classroom climate is conducive to positive educational outcomes (Coop and White, 1974). Student achievement is greater in classrooms where students feel that they have some control over their own behavior. A positive climate promotes fuller development of a student's self-esteem and personal growth. Achievement is greater for classes rated high in involvement and affiliation and for classes in which students come to know and work with peers.

It is through communication that members of the class system, both

students and teachers, relate to each other as they create their psychological and physical environment. Teachers who listen to students, have relevant curricula, and involve students in active learning have fewer behavior problems than those who do not (Swick, 1980). In addition, positive responses to students are most effective in limiting classroom discipline problems. Students who are willing to listen to, and participate with, classmates and the teacher contribute to the positive learning environment.

A positive climate is built on exchange of congruent messages. Every oral or written message sent between teachers and students reflects two levels of meaning, the content level and the relational level. In effective communication, these levels of meaning convey the same message; in poor communication, the meaning is confused or contradictory. For example, if you tell students in a lecture class, "Stop me if you have any questions," yet, when a student asks a question, you respond with an annoyed look or cursory answer, you have sent a mixed message. The content message is that students are welcome to ask questions—to be involved in the interaction. The relational message indicates that "covering material" is more important than the student's concern. A content message directing students to be careful and thorough in writing papers may be discounted by returning the papers late, or with irrelevant remarks, or with no comments. On the other hand, careful, constructive comments will support your request for such student behavior.

Relational messages indicate how you view students, and how you view the student-teacher relationship. Relational messages are often communicated nonverbally through facial expression, gestures, eye contact, movements, or vocal tone. Much research indicates that when a teacher's relational message is one of "I accept you," the student/teacher relationship is positive, and learning is enhanced. (See example, Aspy, 1973; DeCharms, 1968; Dunkin and Biddle, 1974; and Good, et al., 1975.)

The process of climate building

Teachers, at the beginning of the term and throughout the year, can do a great deal to establish a supportive climate which will foster effective and supportive communication among class members. Yet this goal requires time and effort consciously devoted to climate building; the effort must be direct, or the results will be very limited.

The climate-building process occurs throughout the term. The first few days of each new class serve as a testing period—a time when a teacher tries to reduce his or her uncertainty and increase the ability to predict about how things will go for the term. Students are checking the teacher's verbal and nonverbal behavior: They wonder if the teacher will be friendly, distant, demanding, or funny, or how far the teacher can be pushed. Usually, they do not get the chance to know too much about most classmates unless they have studied together previously or unless the teacher provides opportunities for interaction. At the same time, the teachers are trying to reverse the prediction process. They are watching for the cues that will tell them what to expect from students. Are they likely to be responsive, interested, to work hard,

or to goof off? If the teacher and students know each other, there is obviously less uncertainty about how the other is likely to act.

For teachers concerned with building a communication climate, these first days are critical for setting the year's groundwork. They will often start days with exercises designed to share information about class members. Activities such as the wallet exercise, the full-name exercise, or the button exercise may serve as initial icebreakers. In the wallet exercise, the teacher and students are asked to share something in their wallets—such as a picture, a fishing license, or a club membership card—which would tell others something about them. (Often, a teacher may have to allow students without wallets to use a piece of jewelry or clothing). In the full-name exercise, everyone shares his or her full name and the significance of the name (e.g., reason for name, any cultural/ethnic heritage connected to it). In the button exercise, students are given paper circles and asked to draw symbols of three things that are important to them, and then to talk in groups of three or four about these drawings. It is important for the teacher to participate in such exercises so that he or she models an appropriate level of sharing and joins in the group building.

When you initiate the exercises, it is helpful to make the class aware of your purpose for them. You may say something like: "During the term, you will be sharing your ideas and feelings about many subjects with me and the other students in this class. In order for this to be comfortable, you need to know something about each other so we can build an atmosphere in which to share our thoughts. Therefore, at different points in the term, we will take time to focus on ourselves instead of the specific course content in order to create that atmosphere."

In addition to encouraging the exercises, you may wish to have the class share in setting some simple ground rules to encourage honest and open communication. These may include:

- "Only one person may talk at a time."
- "You do not 'cut down' or make fun of another's comments or writings."
- "You are expected to listen to both teacher and student comments."

Such simple rules provide a basis for dealing with discipline issues constructively and for encouraging supportive communication within the group.

Such direct attention to the climate reflects a belief that in classes expected to work in small groups or to cooperate in discussions, it cannot be assumed that individuals will learn about other class members in the halls or cafeteria. Class time must be devoted to sharing information about group members, including the teacher. As the term progresses, occasional periods may be set aside for sharing backgrounds, interests, and feelings solely to develop greater

understanding and trust among class members. The benefits may include a student's increased willingness to risk expressing certain ideas or feelings (orally or in writing), to be supportive of others, or to make an attempt to understand another's viewpoint.

In the next section, we will examine oral and written interpersonal and instructional roles which will contribute to developing and maintaining a supportive learning climate.

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INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES

The average teacher engages in as many as 100 interpersonal interactions daily (Jackson, 1968). Teachers, students, and administrators spend about 1,000 hours annually interacting. Thus, quantity alone makes developing interpersonal competencies important. Add to that the intense desire of most teachers to interact effectively with students, and one finds an overwhelming argument for focusing on interpersonal competencies.

The specific interpersonal competencies which teachers need to develop to build an interactive classroom environment are positive self-concept, self-disclosure, descriptiveness, owning feelings and thoughts, empathy, listening, appropriate response styles, and behavioral flexibility.

Self-concept

Self-concept can greatly influence a teacher's effectiveness; to be most effective, teachers need to feel good about themselves. For example, Combs (1965) found that effective teachers could be distinguished from ineffective teachers by their attitudes toward themselves. According to Combs, effective teachers generally have a positive self-image. They:

- see themselves identified with people, rather than withdrawn or apart from others;
- feel basically adequate and generally able to cope with problems;
- feel trustworthy, reliable, and dependable;
- see themselves as wanted rather than unwanted; likable and attractive (in a personal, not a physical sense); and
- see themselves as worthy, as people of consequence and integrity.

Teachers with positive self-concepts have a flexibility which allows them to foster pupil autonomy and accept pupil ideas. Without a positive self-concept, teachers cannot perceive or address student needs and concerns.

Teacher self-concept has also been found to relate to student achievement. Hamachek (1975) reported that pupils of teachers with high self-concepts attained higher academic achievement than did pupils whose teachers had low self-concepts.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure—voluntarily sharing information about oneself that others are unlikely to know or discover from other sources—can help build a climate of trust and enhance classroom relationships. An underlying assumption of communication is that the more students and teachers know about one another, the more effective communication can be. It is always somewhat of a shock when students see teachers outside of the educational

environment—at the movies, grocery shopping, or at church. Somehow students forget that teachers have a life outside of school. The more teachers can communicate about themselves, the freer students will feel to communicate about themselves. Communication can go beyond the roles of "student" and "teacher" and become truly interpersonal. As a means of self-disclosure, teachers may choose to share drafts of their own writing with students. Such openness reinforces the behaviors desired from students.

Certainly, self-disclosure must be appropriate to be effective. One does not suggest that teachers disclose intimate details of their lives, but simply let students know them as people, and that they try to get to know students in the same way. When students feel that they will not be rejected or ridiculed, they will communicate more openly and freely, with teachers and with each other, in small groups, in classroom discussions, and in all forms of instructional communication.

Descriptiveness

Descriptiveness implies the ability to provide feedback to students which is based on observable behavior, not personalities. "Your paper is late" is a descriptive statement. A statement such as, "Evidently this class is not too important to you since you don't find it necessary to complete assignments on time," is based on a personal reaction, not an observable behavior.

To be descriptive, feedback—both written and oral—should focus on (adapted from Johnson, 1972, pp. 16-17):

- behavior rather than persons;
- observations rather than inferences;
- description of behavior in terms of "more or less" rather than in terms of "either/or";
- behavior in the specific "here and now" rather than in the abstract "there and then";
- exploration of alternatives rather than answers or solutions;
- what is said rather than why it was said; and
- time and place so that feedback can be received at appropriate times.

In description, we say and write things as concretely and specifically as possible. We use words that are most likely to be understood by the persons with whom we are communicating. This reflects the communication principle that "words don't mean, people do." The problem of personal meaning can cause much misunderstanding, difficulty, and ineffectiveness in communication.

Owning feelings

Owning our feelings can do much to build a positive communication climate in the classroom. Each person communicates from a given perception. Communicating feelings and thoughts as our own avoids the problem of implying that we are always right—that what we think and feel are ultimate truths. For example, writing on a student's paper, "I wish you'd write more legibly," is more owning than, "No one could possibly read your writing." Explaining to a student, "I get upset when you come in late because I have to rearrange the groups to fit you in," is more owning than, "Being late is not acceptable." The "owning" of the first statements builds a more positive communication climate, since it does not blame the other person and also implies that perhaps another teacher would not find the writing illegible or be upset with a student's lateness.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to "walk a mile" in another's shoes—to understand as closely as possible the feelings, values, and needs of another. If as teachers we are empathic, we are able to perceive situations, ideas, and feelings as students perceive them. We can put ourselves in the student's situation. Empathy does not mean that teachers necessarily agree with a student's feelings or ideas, but that they can understand them from a student's viewpoint. For example, a teacher can understand if a student chose to go to a family reunion rather than to do homework. However, the teacher does not have to agree with or support the student's decision.

Recent research (Andersen, et al., 1981) indicates that students regarded more positively teachers who conveyed a positive communication style (relaxed, open, not dominant, attentive, friendly) and showed more interpersonal solidarity (behaviors that communicate closeness—both physical and psychological) with students. Students view these teachers as being more effective, like the course more, and are more willing to apply course content to "real life," as well as more willing to take additional courses from these teachers.

Listening

How many times do we hear and not listen? Probably more often than any of us would like to admit. Listening is much more than just hearing. Hearing is only the first step in the listening process—the physical step when sound waves hit the eardrum. Three more steps must occur before the listening process is complete—the interpretation of the sound waves (leading to understanding or misunderstanding), the evaluation step (when you decide how you will use the information), and finally, the response step (reacting to what you heard).

Why is effective listening important? First of all, we spend a great deal of time listening. We spend 70 percent of our waking time in some form of communication. Of that time, 11 percent is spent in writing, 15 percent in reading, 32 percent in talking, and 42 percent in listening (Barker, 1971). Ac-

Rogers reports that if a person uses a category as much as 40 percent of the time, the individual is *always* seen as responding that way. Evidently, some teachers are engaging in the response styles (evaluating and interpreting) which will decrease, rather than increase, students' desire to communicate, and therefore prohibit building an interactive communication climate.

Simply making a response is insufficient. To make sure that what you heard was what the other person meant, two techniques should be employed—paraphrasing and perception-checking.

Paraphrasing is a restatement of both the content and the feelings of another person's message. It is not, however, simply parroting another's words. Often, a speaker's feelings are even more important to a listener understanding a message than are the actual words spoken. Thus, paraphrasing restates both the content and the feeling components of the message. Suppose a student says to you, "I don't see how I can finish this paper by tomorrow. I have two tests tomorrow, too." Your paraphrase might be, "It sounds like things are really hectic for you, and you're getting really frustrated."

If paraphrasing sounds trite, uncomfortable, or clumsy, keep in mind two important ideas: First, often when one learns a new skill, it initially feels "funny," like learning to ride a bike. But with practice, riding a bike becomes easier and very natural. The same is true of paraphrasing. The more you practice and use the skill, the easier it will become. Second, paraphrasing is not always appropriate or necessary. If someone says to you, "Wow, what fantastic weather!"—there is no need to paraphrase. Paraphrasing should be used to help you avoid confusion and misunderstanding. The overuse of the paraphrasing technique is as detrimental to effective communication as its underuse.

Perception-checking is similar to paraphrasing in that it seeks to clarify the speaker's meaning. However, a perception check is not limited to the last utterance by a speaker. Perception-checking refers to behavior over an extended period of time.

A perception check consists of three components: 1) sense data describing what was heard and seen to lead to formation of a conclusion; 2) the conclusion drawn; and 3) a statement asking the speaker whether the conclusion is accurate. Suppose a student has been late every day of the week, has been irritable, and fails to turn in homework assignments. You decide to talk with the student, and might say, "Jane, you've been late for class every day this week, you argue with other students in the class, and you aren't turning in your assignments. I interpret all this to mean that you are having difficulty with this class. Am I right?"

Perception checks can be written as well as oral. For example, you might write on a student's paper, "I don't see three sources as required. This paper was to be a critical analysis of the book, not a summary. Did you misunderstand the assignment?" The basic purpose of perception-checking is to clarify one's perceptions of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or intentions. Since it is impossible to communicate with others without making some inferences, it is important for teachers to "check out" those inferences to make communication with students as effective as possible.

Behavioral flexibility

Behavioral flexibility implies the ability to use communications skills like self-disclosure, empathy, owning feelings, or descriptiveness appropriately. It is one thing to learn the skills and to be able to use them in isolation and another to select the most appropriate interpersonal response based on the student's needs at a particular moment. For example, in dealing with a student who has become disruptive since his parents' separation, you have choices about handling the situation. You may just describe how you are seeing him. As another example, when responding to student papers, you may find that you always use an approach characterized by comments aimed at pointing out mistakes. There may be more positive approaches to reach or motivate particular students.

Suppose that you provide written feedback to a draft of a student's paper. You may imagine yourself in the roles of collaborator or reader, as well as the critic with the searching eyes. The collaborator response attempts to make helpful suggestions for change that avoid explicit criticism. Comments such as, "How can the link between these ideas be made clearer to the reader?" or "A second example of a different type might make the concept clearer to the reader," are less threatening and more instructive than "no transition" or "poor support." Comments like "irrelevant," "poor word choice," "weak sentence," or "lacks organization" do not indicate the ways of coping with an identified concern. Rather, they tend to stymie a writer, often to the point of silence. Collaborative statements are helpful, and hopeful, indicators of future possible change, encouraging a student to revise with direction and focus.

When using a reader response style, you react to the writing in a nonevaluative manner. You may ask questions registering your personal interests or confusion about a point, while indicating your agreement or disagreement with content or logic. In short, you provide feedback to the student writer from the viewpoint of an interested, involved reader. Comments such as, "How does this tie back to the story about the mirrored reflection?" or "I have always wanted to know more about Jazz," give the writer a perception of how the work is being appreciated or perceived. Comments like, "I have trouble believing environmentalists would support that legislation," identify a differing content perspective which might need attention in a later draft.

Having flexibility to change your response mode in interpersonal circumstances heightens effectiveness in adapting to various student needs.

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TEACHER ROLES

Because as teachers we have a variety of student learning objectives, we need various teaching roles to help students meet the objectives. The major communication-related instructional roles include information dispenser, discussion leader, and small-group facilitator. Each will be discussed briefly, and items important to each to build an interactive climate will also be delineated.

Information dispenser

This role is primary for instruction. Teachers explain assignments, give directions, provide demonstrations, and the like. Perhaps the major way in which information is dispensed in classrooms is by lecturing.

Although it has been suggested that lecturing is an instructional strategy in which the "notes of the teacher become the notes of the student without going through the minds of either," lecturing is a valuable skill to develop. It is an efficient, time-saving means of presenting material not available to students elsewhere. It also enables the teacher to synthesize complex material and provide a framework for organizing learning.

Too often, the lecture is perceived as one-way communication. Students should become actively involved in the lecture, and teachers can increase interaction with students during a lecture by:

- using questions that require immediate student response;
- asking rhetorical questions to stimulate their thinking;
- giving a case to be analyzed;
- posing a problem to solve during the lecture; and
- conducting mini-discussions during the lecture.

Classroom discussion leader

During inservice workshops, teachers often ask, "Why don't my students participate in class discussions? I give them the opportunity, but they don't take advantage of it." Because of the teacher's traditional role as an information dispenser, students have been conditioned to "sit and listen." Teachers should encourage students to participate in discussion; simply providing them the opportunity to interact is insufficient. The first step involves building a positive, supportive classroom climate. The next step is to use questions carefully to spur involvement.

Since the crux of the discussion will be the questions asked of the students, the primary questions should be outlined before the discussion. (These

Successfully facilitating discussion necessitates teachers adapting behavior. We cannot be the ultimate, final authority on a topic if we expect students to discuss openly and productively. Some ways that we need to adapt have been discussed in the previous section on question-asking. In addition, the traditional row arrangement discourages student-student interaction and focuses attention on the teacher at the front of the room. The semicircular arrangement encourages discussion.

Finally, try not to be a slave to a discussion topic. It may be more valuable to allow students to pursue a segment of the topic which really interests them than to force them to follow an agenda. For example, during a discussion on environmental problems, the class may become very involved in problems of their community. As a result of the discussion, they may decide to ask experts in the community to speak to the class, start a neighborhood cleanup campaign, write editorials to the local paper, and prepare oral reports on various related topics. This seems much more beneficial than the teacher getting through the entire discussion as originally planned.

Small-group facilitator

Facilitating small groups requires careful planning and organizing of the task. Too often, we simply say to students, "Get together in small groups and discuss *Ethan Frome*."

This planning begins with the objective—what exactly do you want them to know? Based on the objectives, you must decide on the task that the small groups are to complete. The task may take several forms. Students may be asked to solve a problem or analyze a case study and reach an agreement concerning what should be done in the situation presented; requested to write a joint paper focusing on the nature and scope of the problem; asked to role-play situations as a means of learning to solve problems and relate to others; or asked to research a topic area and present an oral or written report on their findings. Research groups enable students to develop research and critical thinking skills.

Regardless of the small-group task chosen, take considerable time to set the scene. The goal of the task should be clear to students, as well as the time allotted for them to complete it. Also, provide information on how they should progress. For example, if the task is to solve a particular problem, this must be very clear. In addition, students should receive a list of questions or areas to consider in order to solve the problem or analyze the case study. If structure is not provided, students will spend a large proportion of time unproductively.

You may also need to discuss the "rules" of working in small groups. For example, all suggestions should be considered, no one should dominate the discussion, all comments should be directed towards the entire group, compromise is necessary, everyone should be involved in the discussion and task, the group should "stay on track," excessive "hair-splitting" should be avoided, and participants should "hear each other out" before disagreeing.

As the group discussions progress, it is important for you to move from group to group to check if instructions are being followed and if students

are progressing well. This check gives you valuable information concerning areas of confusion or similar problems all groups are having. You can use some of the information to help process the activity when all groups are finished.

Also, make sure that groups have sufficient space in which to work. If the groups are too close, concentration may be difficult. Groups should also use a circular seating arrangement so that all persons can interact freely.

When all groups complete the task, the entire class should discuss the accomplishments of each group. If all groups are working on the same problem, major ideas and solutions to the task should be discussed. Each group could have a spokesperson to report back to the class on the group's decision or findings.

One final suggestion—it is possible to involve all students in the small-group process without dividing the entire class into groups. One popular means to do this is the "fishbowl" technique. A small group of students form the inner circle with the remainder of the class forming a larger circle around them. After a designated period of time, students from the outer circle can join the inner circle—a student taps another on the shoulder and exchanges places with the individual. Another variation is to have an empty chair in the inner circle. Each student from the outer circle can enter the group by occupying the chair and expressing an idea or opinion; the student then returns to the outer circle.

Using small groups as a teaching strategy is particularly beneficial to students as they learn to write. In *Language and Learning*, James Britton (1970) stresses the value of talk as a means of enabling students to organize experience. Through discussion, students are able to understand subject matter more fully and to create language structures through which to better express ideas. In addition, students may form a support system for each other as writers and encourage experimentation and development through caring, constructive feedback. Trying out ideas on a small group of fellow students aids writers in shaping, adapting , and organizing material based on actual responses. Talking during the act of writing, then, makes writing a form of genuine communication between people. It also makes writing and revising a shared experience and, hence, a less frightening one. A description of an elementary school writing project indicates that it was standard practice for teachers to review a piece of writing with the child to help clarify it. Teachers also encouraged small-group activities while children questioned each other, which added to the writer's sense of audience. Thus, the children knew that:

> **they were writing not just for themselves and not just for the teacher, but for everybody in the classroom. They began to pay attention to how their readers responded (Brandt, 1982).**

Although it may take students a while to be comfortable and efficient working in small groups, the values of peer exploration and teaching will eventually outweigh the time and effort required to develop small groups.

A teacher with a repertoire of interpersonal communication skills and teaching roles has a greater chance of success with various students or classes than one who has limited skills in this area.

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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

In addition to building a psychologically supportive climate, teachers can alter the nonhuman aspects of the classroom environment, such as space and time. This type of environment constitutes a system of communication which serves as a type of language. The physical aspects of an individual's room—the seating arrangement and decor, for example—may influence who talks to whom, where, for how long, and the kinds of things about which they may communicate. The way that a person structures time or allows it to be structured, and the time given to certain activities communicate much about a person's values and priorities.

A key concept of classroom design is the relationship between the architect's message and the teacher's message. In other words, is the learning space design functionally related to what the teacher-manager intends to do? For example, asking students in rows of bolted down desks to work in small groups clearly contradicts the architect's message about the use of space. But asking students in movable chairs to gather into small groups is possible and consistent with the architect's intent. Requesting four students at a small table to write separate compositions silently will not be as effective as asking them to collaborate on a joint writing project since the setting clearly indicates oral communication is desirable.

The term, "classroom," may evoke images of chairs in straight rows with a teacher in front of the room behind a desk, chairs in a horseshoe with the teacher at the opening, a circle with the teacher included, or groups of tables and chairs with the teacher moving from group to group. In addition, classrooms may incorporate such arrangements as theatres, laboratories, kitchens, repair shops, and art studios.

Most classrooms are of the row/column arrangement. In this setup, the teacher has 50 times more space than the students to move about and has almost total control of the kinds of communication that will occur (Sommer, 1969, p. 99). Students face the teacher when he or she lectures, fields questions, or holds discussion. "When the teacher talks, the chances are substantial that a large number of pupils will be addressed, that the pupil who talks next will be near the front, or in a center strip, that the pupil will be designated by the teacher (verbally or nonverbally), and that the teacher will speak next" (Friedrich, et al., 1976, p. 26).

Due to the limited possibility of student-to-student eye contact, little peer interaction is possible. Students willing to communicate are likely to select seats in the front or center where they will be visible to the teacher; those who are apprehensive or unwilling to speak will select chairs near the back and sides. If seating is alphabetical, certain students will always find themselves in the back or on the sides, thus effectively limiting their opportunity to participate actively. Teachers can encourage student participation in such a setting by rearranging the seating periodically so that each student experiences a front and center location, or by consciously moving around the room to avoid always being front and center and looking directly at the same faces.

In a horseshoe or circle arrangement, students are more likely to interact because of increased eye contact. By positioning yourself at the head of the horseshoe, you ensure your ability to command attention when necessary. By blending into the circle, a teacher may nonverbally indicate a lack of desire to command more attention and that his or her contributions should be accepted as equal with those of the students.

Movable chairs or table-chair arrangements provide teachers with the option of using small groups for peer teaching and learning. This may be the ideal setting for revision sessions based on audience reaction to a written draft, or for small-group problemsolving on any topic.

Additionally, the decor of the room can add to building a group climate. In self-contained classrooms, teachers may display pictures of students in a variety of situations (e.g., baby contest, student of the week, etc.) and display good writing samples of everyone over time. Such visual stimuli provide members of the class system with additional information about each other, thus contributing to predictability and, hopefully, to fuller sharing of ideas and feelings.

Also, the way the teacher manages a classroom communicates a great deal to students. Well-managed classrooms are characterized by "maximizing the time students spend in productive work," rather than "stressing control of misbehavior" (Good and Brophy, 1978, p. 170). Learning is related to time spent on a task, so that the amount of time that teachers allot to certain topics or processes will indicate their importance to students. Additionally, by spending time on climate-building, you communicate its value to you. A teacher who solely structures all class time sends a very different message than a teacher who allows some determination by students of how their time is spent. This gives them some responsibility for their own learning. How you spend your time and how your students spend their time is directly related to learning and climate-building.

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BARRIERS TO INTERACTION

People select, organize, and interpret stimuli gained through the senses into a meaningful picture of the world. This process is called perception and is the basis of communication.

As for classroom interaction, teachers' and students' perceptions will affect how they communicate with each other. Although numerous educational variables could be chosen to demonstrate the affect of perception on classroom communication, four seem particularly relevant to this paper: teacher expectancy, sex-role stereotypes, communication apprehension, and writing apprehension.

Teacher expectancy

With the Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968 publication of *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, the controversy concerning the effect of teacher expectations on students began. Rosenthal and Jacobson argued that a teacher's expectations led to a self-fulfilling prophecy—that if the teacher expected students to do well academically, they did; if the teacher expected students to do poorly, they did.

We now know that a teacher's expectations are not automatically self-fulfilling. To become self-fulfilling, the expectations must be communicated to the student. Basically, the process works as follows (Good and Brophy, 1978, p. 72):

1. Teachers expect certain behaviors from certain students.

2. These expectations influence the teacher's behavior towards these students.

3. The teacher's behavior communicates to the students what the teacher expects of them. These expectations affect the student's self-concept, motivation to achieve, and achievement.

4. If the teacher's behavior is consistent over time and the student does not resist it, high-expectation students will tend to achieve well and low-expectation students will not.

5. Over time, students' achievement and behavior will conform more closely to the teacher's expectations. Thus, if the student does not respond to or accept the teacher's communication, no self-fulfilling prophecy occurs.

Forming expectations is normal. As teachers, we must be aware of the process of expectancy-formation and strive to make our expectations as realistic as possible. To do this, we need to know how teachers communicate their

expectancies to students. Brophy and Good reviewed research demonstrating that expectations are communicated in several ways (Brophy and Good, 1974, pp. 330-339). Teachers have been observed to wait less time for low-achieving students to answer questions than for high-achieving students. They provide low-achievers with the correct answers more often than high-achievers; reward incorrect or marginal answers of low-achievers; criticize more and praise them less frequently than high-achievers, and fail to respond to their answers. They also pay less attention to low-achievers in terms of eye contact, smiling, calling on them less frequently, and seating these students farther from them. And, finally, teachers demand less from low-achievers than from high-achievers.

Should the teacher strive to have only positive expectations? The foregoing may seem to suggest this. However, appropriate expectations, not necessarily high expectations, are what teachers should strive for:

> **Expectations should be appropriate rather than necessarily high, and they must be followed up with appropriate behavior. This means planned learning experiences that take students at the level they are now and move them along at a pace they can handle. The pace that will allow continued success and improvement is the correct pace and will vary with different students. Teachers should not feel guilty or feel that they are stigmatizing slower learners by moving them along at a slower pace.**
>
> **As long as students are working up to their potential and progressing at a steady rate, the teacher has reason to be satisfied. There will be cause for criticism only if the slower children are moved along at a slower pace than they can handle because the teacher's expectations for them are too low, are never tested out or reevaluated, and consequently, are unalterable (Good and Brophy, 1978, p. 86).**

Communication apprehension

What exactly is communication apprehension and how extensive is it? The student with high-communication apprehension is one who attaches high levels of anxiety to the oral communication encounter. The individual is fearful of communication, will go to great lengths to avoid communication situations, and when by chance or necessity is placed in such situations, feels uncomfortable, tense, embarrassed, and shy.

Chances are that you will have many students with this problem. One of every five students experiences high-communication apprehension, and an additional 20 percent are affected to some degree (McCroskey, 1977). Shaw (1967) found that between 15 percent and 25 percent of elementary school students that he examined reported high apprehension. Similar results have been found at other age levels.

Communication apprehension has far-reaching effects; of most importance is its impact on achievement. Not only are students with high levels of ap-

prehension perceived by teachers as having less likelihood of success in almost every subject regardless of intelligence, effort, or academic ability, but they have a lower grade-point average and lower scores on achievement tests than low-communication apprehensive students. (See research cited in Cooper, 1981, pp. 197-221.)

Several programs for helping high-apprehensive students have been developed (Glaser, 1981). In some cases, teachers and counselors have worked together to aid the student. The more positive the classroom climate, the better the chance that fear of communicating will lessen. If students know that they will not be ridiculed by the teacher or peers, they will be more willing to communicate.

Writing apprehension

Just as some students are fearful about communicating orally, others are fearful about written communication. Writing, like oral communication, is an interactive process. The writer "writes to" an audience just as a speaker "speaks to" an audience. Some students fear criticism of their ideas by the audience. Individuals who are highly apprehensive about writing avoid writing. Avoidance leads to less practice in writing, which, in turn, leads to less skill development and lower teacher evaluations.

Apprehensive students tend to write shorter essays, use fewer commas, use fewer personal pronouns, a smaller number of delimiting punctuation marks, and fewer words ending in "ly" (Daly, 1977). These findings suggest that the writing of high-apprehensive students differs both in quantity and quality from that of low-apprehensive students. Not only do high-apprehensive students write less, but they are less willing to show strong emotional commitment to writing and to claim their ideas as their own.

Considerably less is known about the causes and treatment of writing apprehension than about its consequences. Creating a positive communication climate in which feedback is constructive can do much to help students feel more comfortable about sharing their ideas in writing.

Sex-role differences

One of the most obvious ways in which teacher perception affects classroom interaction relates to the differences in treatment of male and female students.

In their review of research concerning classroom interaction as it relates to males and females, Brophy and Good (1974, pp. 199-239) indicated that teachers (regardless of sex):

- used a harsh tone when reprimanding boys and a conversational tone when reprimanding girls;
- reprimanded boys more often than girls;
- responded to a girl's reading failure by providing a second response opportunity or a clue, but called on someone else or provided the word to boys;

- had more interactions of all types with boys than with girls;
- overestimated the achievement level of girls and underestimated it for boys; and
- had more negative attitudes toward boys in terms of their potential for disruptive behavior and school motivation.

In addition, research points to the differences in male and female teachers' classrooms:

> **First, the female teachers' classes seemed to be more active, with greater student involvement and greater student willingness to initiate interaction with the teachers. Students initiated more comments and questions in the female teachers' classes, had more response opportunities, and initiated more private contacts with teachers. Also, they were more likely to take a guess when unsure of their response, while they were more likely to remain silent in a male teacher's classroom. Thus, the students apparently felt safer in guessing in the female teachers' classes (Brophy and Good, 1974, p. 235).**
>
> **Male teachers more often failed to give feedback to students, but this happened mostly after correct or part-correct answers. Female teachers, in contrast, more often failed to give feedback after the student had responded incorrectly or had failed to answer. Following wrong answers or failures to respond, male teachers were more likely to provide process feedback to give explanations, or clear up the student's misunderstanding. In general, in failure situations male teachers were more likely to provide abstract feedback or to provide a second response opportunity by asking another question, while female teachers were more likely to give the answer or call on someone else (p. 236).**

Certainly, numerous other classroom variables not discussed here affect the interaction pattern. However, regardless of the variable (race, mental handicaps, physical handicaps, cross-cultural differences), the problem is the same: Teachers' perceptions affect how they communicate with students, and this communication can affect a student's academic achievement, motivation, self-concept, or desire to communicate.

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CONCLUSION

This paper has examined classroom climate—ways to improve it and variables affecting it. Outlined were several interpersonal and instructional competencies which should be included in a teacher's repertoire. Barriers to classroom interaction were also discussed. Although paying special attention to classroom climate is time-consuming for teachers, in the long run, the payoffs in student motivation and achievement are well worth the effort. Every effective teacher-manager of a classroom system becomes an accomplished juggler of many competencies, a skilled observer of human nature, and a sensitive catalyst who brings the appropriate skills and people into meaningful interaction. Consider the following self-assessment questions on classroom climate to evaluate how well you are fostering a positive, interactive environment.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

1. **How would you describe the climate in your classroom?** How do your students describe it? What changes could you institute to make it even more effective?

2. **Consider your interpersonal competencies.** Do you believe that you have a wide range of skills at your command? How often do you self-disclose to your students? Is your feedback descriptive? Do you own your feelings rather than blame others? Under what circumstances do you have empathy for students? Can you listen on various levels? Which response style do you use most often? Which competencies need strengthening?

3. **Which teacher role do you engage in most?** How does this role fit with the learning climate that you wish to create in the classroom? To what extent would you like to alter your instructional roles? Why?

4. **Consider the physical environment of your classroom.** Diagram the arrangement. If it is not conducive to good classroom interaction, how might you change it?

5. **What are your perceptions of various types of students?** How does this affect your classroom interaction with students?

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